

## Indigenous babies being removed from parents at rising rates, study finds

*Infants in WA being placed into out-of-home care at 10 times the rate of their non-Indigenous counterparts*

Calla Wahlquist  
Mon 25 Feb 2019



*Rates of child removal for Indigenous children of all ages have increased by 21% since 2012.  
Photograph: Marianna Massey/AAP*

Indigenous newborns and babies less than one year old are being removed from their parents and placed into out-of-home care at increased rates, a study by the Telethon Institute has found.

The study, published in the journal of Child Abuse and Neglect, said that Indigenous infants in Western Australia had been removed and placed into out-of-home care at 10 times the rate of non-Indigenous infants and warned it should be “seen as a priority requiring urgent action to prevent further intergenerational trauma”.

Nationally rates of child removal for Indigenous children of all ages are 10 times higher than rates of removal for non-Indigenous children, a 21% increase from 2012, but there is limited national data on the removal of infants.

The study compared data from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare with data from WA child protection services and found “evidence of increasing early removal”.

One of the authors was Professor Rhonda Marriott, a Nyikina woman and the pro vice chancellor of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership at Murdoch University. She said Aboriginal parents did not seem to be granted “the same amount of consideration and leniency” by child protection workers.

“There is anecdotal evidence that the number of children that are being removed as babies from places like King Edward Memorial hospital is rising,” Marriott said. “We definitely have this sense that the department has given up and doesn’t quite know what to do.”

An analysis of WA child removal data from 1990 to 2010 showed that the most common factors present in cases where babies were removed as infants was a substance abuse notification against the mother, followed by a mental health notification against the mother, and the remoteness of their home community.

Marriott said many of those who had their child removed were young mothers who had themselves grown up in out-of-home care and because they present with risk factors are not given a chance to parent.

“Hope is a very easy thing to lose, and a very hard thing to regain,” she said. “Where we leave families without hope it is a pretty tragic thing.”

She said Aboriginal child welfare workers were also concerned that controversial adoption laws introduced in New South Wales, which allow for the adoption of children in the foster system without parental consent, could be introduced in other jurisdictions.

Marriott said government should put money into supporting parenting services for those mothers, but added that any new investment should be co-designed with Aboriginal community-controlled organisations.

Governments are introducing more co-designed programs, but Marriott said the process was overly bureaucratic and progress slow.

Muriel Bamblett, the chairperson of the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (Snaicc) and the chief executive of the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, said rates of child protection notifications against babies less than 12 months old were on the rise.

Last year, 20.1% of the 663 unborn notifications (meaning child protection risks that were flagged during pregnancy) on Aboriginal mothers in Victoria were substantiated. For non-Indigenous mothers, just 12.4% of unborn notifications were substantiated.

She said the difference could be attributed to substance abuse, particularly the increased use of methamphetamines and “ice”.

“It’s a tragedy when we are waiting at hospitals for babies to be born because there are serious issues with the parents and the risk to the baby is very high,” she said.

Bamblett said there were some isolated programs, such as the Bumps to Babes program run by Mallee District Aboriginal Services, that had succeeded in reducing child protection rates by combining prenatal and parenting classes.

Involvement in the child protection system was a common theme in a recent WA coronial report into Indigenous youth suicide. One of the 42 recommendations was to appoint a commissioner for Aboriginal children and young people who would have oversight of child protection matters.